

This section is aimed at introducing you to the many remarkable individuals in the organization through profiles, interviews, personal stories and obituaries.

THE ROAD TO KOPAN:

By Karuna Cayton

Like So Many Roads

*This section, **The Road to Kopan**, features stories from students who have found their way to, and their home at, Kopan Monastery. In this issue, we talked to **Karuna Cayton**, FPMT student for 36 years. Karuna is currently a member of the FPMT, Inc. Board of Directors and has served the organization and Kopan Monastery in a variety of capacities since attending his first Kopan course.*

Like so many roads, the road to Kopan doesn't really seem to have a discernible beginning. For me, I'll just choose the intersection of when I decided to join a year abroad program at the college I was attending in 1975 as the beginning of my "road to Kopan."

Before attending college I had been involved in yoga and Hinduism since I was 17. I was a fairly typical Southern California boy growing up in the late 60s and early 70s – lots of drugs, lots of surfing, lots of parties and a strong dislike of school. Probably as a result of the psychedelics I took and a few positive karmic imprints, I became very interested in Eastern thought. One day, when I was a senior in high school, I went to a yoga retreat. I learned some hatha yoga, breathing exercises and meditation but, more importantly, I gave up drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and meat. I also lost all of my friends. I became a devoted yoga practitioner and met a guru who gave me the name "Karuna." I don't remember hearing much about Buddhism then, but I did see Chogyam Trungpa at a lecture once. He was a bit extreme for my puritan yoga ways, giving

his lecture with a cigarette in one hand and glass of vodka in the other. But, I definitely sensed a holiness about him.

Each year, the college I attended in Washington State had a study abroad program that moved from country to country. My third year at college, the country was Nepal.

I was 20 when I entered the program and was feeling unfulfilled with my spiritual path, no longer considering myself really a Hindu. I expressed my concerns to my advisor at the college who responded, "Well, why don't you go to Nepal and do a research project on how different Hinduism is in Nepal from that transplanted to the United States." It sounded OK because I could still slip into India to find my real guru. "Anyway, if that doesn't work out, you know there is a lot of Buddhism in Nepal. Maybe you'd like this book." She handed me the first translation of *The Bodhisattva's Guide to Enlightenment* (the *Bodhicharyavatara*) by Shantideva. I read it and was blown away that such teachings existed.

So, in August of 1975, I landed in Nepal with about 20 other students. I fell in love with the country immediately. I half-heartedly

went through the motions of trying to advance my research project but was overwhelmed by the enormity of my topic and, at the same time, not all that interested in it either. I could see from my village a small hill with a couple of buildings on it. I was told it was a Buddhist monastery that had an annual November course for Westerners. Clearly, such a course was for tourists and I, feeling smug in being a “local,” was certainly not going to hang around a bunch of tourists for a month. However, I was floundering in my research and my advisor (herself a practicing Buddhist) suggested I at least give the monastery a look. So, I swallowed my pride and wandered up one morning to Kopan.

While feeling a bit uncomfortable and self-conscious, I looked around and was pleasantly surprised to find mostly Tibetan and Sherpa monks. I was told that if I was interested in attending the November course the following month, I would have to have an interview with the meditation leader, a Dutch monk named Marcel.

I didn't really think my interview with Marcel went all that well. I found him stiff, overly blunt, and not all that warm and fuzzy. On the other hand, he was a monk who had recently come out of long retreat and so I gave him the benefit of the doubt. I felt like I was in a job interview but I think he was just checking to make sure I wasn't too crazy, too much of a hippie, or too flippant in my attitude. I was waiting to officially hear I had passed the interview, but he just told me that if I'd like to sign up, I could do so that day.

In those days, the meditation course was held in a temporary structure of grass mats for walls and corrugated iron for roofing. The floor was dirt covered by more grass mats. I think there was some rudimentary electricity. The toilets were dug into the hillside with more grass mat walls offering only the bare minimum in privacy. We bathed at the spring at the bottom of the hill. We slept four to a room in the monks' vacated living quarters, the monks themselves doubling up in the remaining rooms.

The course started in the evening and Marcel gave the introduction. People were still preparing the



Karuna Cayton at Kopan with Ven. Thubten Gyatso (Dr. Adrian Feldmann). 1978 or 1979.

altar in the “tent.” I remember vividly someone putting a picture of a smiling lama on the altar and I was transfixed. I started to cry whenever I looked at the picture. I didn't know then, but it was a picture of Lama Yeshe.

The next morning, Lama Zopa Rinpoche came to teach. During the course he taught twice a day for the full month, except for when Lama Yeshe would teach. Sometimes, Rinpoche would also come for the morning precepts during the second two weeks of the course. There were about 180 people attending. When Rinpoche gave his first lecture, I heard him speak about bodhichitta and the need to test the teachings. From that moment on, I knew I was home; I had found what I was looking for.

I also had the great fortune to privately tutor Lama Yeshe's own guru's incarnation, 7-year-old Yangsi Rinpoche. However, he was running circles around me and, as a starry-eyed new Buddhist recruit, I found it increasingly difficult to keep him interested in what I was trying to teach him. I took my dilemma to Lama Lhundrup. He agreed that I could not “beat”

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Rinpoche. “But,” he said sternly, “You must beat him with your mind.”

I stayed a year and a half, six months longer than my study abroad program, and the day came when I finally had to return to the United States. The day before I was to return, I received an invitation from Lama Yeshe to have breakfast. As I sat with Lama Yeshe on the gompa roof having eggs, chapatti, fruit and tea, he spoke about many things. I tried nervously to join in but I was overwhelmed. I found Lama, always, overwhelming. Whether it was overwhelming love and warmth, overwhelming sternness and wrath, or overwhelming vision and possibility, it was like sitting with a nuclear reactor in the room. I got the courage to sheepishly ask him, “Lama, after I finish my degree, should I come back?” He gave me a dismissive look and then with the wave of his hand said, “I never tell my students what to do.” Conversation over. There was a long silence as he continued eating his breakfast. After what seemed like ten minutes (but probably closer to two), he looked up at me and said, “So, when you come back next year, I

would like you to set up an English program for my monks.”

I came back a year and half later and set up, administered and taught a Western studies program for the monks. This included managing our volunteer teachers, mostly Westerners who came from all over the world. Along with English, social studies and math, other modern secular topics were integrated with the monks’ traditional Buddhist study. I spent 12 of the next 14 years of my life living at Kopan with “a bunch of tourists.”

For some reason, in all the years I was at Kopan, we always seemed to have 83 monks. Just before Lama passed away, we stood together on the roof of the gompa. Lama waved his hand in the space in front of us and, as if opening a curtain for a split second revealing a snapshot of the future, he stated, “I want a thousand monks and nuns here.” Today, there are about 780 Sangha living and studying at Kopan Monastery. Lama would be pleased. ♦

You can find more information about Kopan Monastery and the famous November course at www.kopan-monastery.com

Kopan Monastery

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